







**SAXO GRAMMATICUS**  
**OR**  
**FIRST AID FOR THE BEST-SELLER**

## TO-DAY AND TO-MORROW

*For a Full List of this Series see  
the end of this Book*

**SAXO GRAMMATICUS**  
**OR**  
**FIRST AID FOR THE BEST-SELLER**

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**LONDON**  
**KEGAN PAUL TRENCH TRUBNER & CO., LTD.**  
**NEW YORK: E. P. DUTTON & CO.**  
**1930**

*Printed in Great Britain by*  
**MACKAYS LTD., CHATHAM.**

# SAXO GRAMMATICUS

OR

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WE are told by the biographer of that fine literary craftsman C. E. Montague that 'he came to hate a bad sentence like a bad smell and to revel in a good one as he might in a rose.' Ability to write 'good sentences,' *i.e.* to write with a formal perfection which invites the reader to revel, is given to few and can hardly be acquired. The great prose-writer is born, not made. Ability to write sentences that do not sin against clearness, logic, and gram-



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matical usage is within the power of every being gifted with normal intelligence and a conscience. Anatole France recognized three essential qualities in good French prose—‘D’abord la clarté, puis encore la clarté, et enfin la clarté.’ Although the pellucid clarity of French prose is hardly attainable in English, the writer who has a conscience will strive to approach it; and that writer is conscienceless who fails to read over carefully each paragraph he has composed and to ask himself sternly, ‘Is this clear?’

For many years I have amused myself by noting the linguistic absurdities perpetrated by contemporary authors, not so much from the purely grammatical point of view (for grammar,

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after all, is both arbitrary and fluid), as from that of common sense. I have seen the unceasing torrent that flows from the Press become each year more voluminous, more turbid, and more turgid; and have come to the conclusion that To-day's English is bad, that To-morrow's English will be worse, and that The Day after To-morrow's will be so completely made safe for democracy as to realize Henry Bradley's prophetic vision of 'the tremendous revolution of creating a new literary language on the basis of the spoken tongue.' Some few writers, 'rari nantes in gurgite vasto,' still swim against the tide, but public opinion watches their struggles with apathy or contempt; for always 'the British pig,' says Stevenson, 'returns to his

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true love, the love of the style-less, of the shapeless, the slapdash, and the disorderly.'

It seems likely, judging by the present trend of fashion, that Tomorrow's reading will consist almost entirely of shockers, with a small leavening of peptonized uplift and dilettante pornography. The purveyors of such wares are the most notorious among linguistic criminals, but they often find themselves in very good company. Hearken to a University professor :

' Therefore, since, as the latter know everything contained in this book, they do not need it, and so probably will not read it, while the others may now venture upon it, which would not have done so had it been disfigured by phonetic symbols.'

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Hearken to a great man of science, who is also, by exception, a man of wide culture :

‘ What the ultimate truth in these matters may be, we must not be too confident and dogmatic.’

Hearken to a writer on ‘ The Queer Ways of Words ’ :

‘ We men sometimes wonder why women are easily satisfied with a permanent wave that lasts only six months and usually costs her husband about £5.’

Hearken to a political theorist :

‘ As to how far the Jews are gaining an undue influence in our national life, and as to whether such influence in the Press, in the cinema, and in plays is beneficial or not, is manifestly quite beyond the scope of this book.’

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Hearken to a popular novelist :

‘ As elderly people will, it took him some few moments to focus his mentality.’

These truly awful examples, any one of which would surely have made the late C. E. Montague shout for open windows, impel the curious to ask what has happened to the proof-readers. Why do they not, in the beautiful words just quoted, focus their mentality ? Some years ago Sir Frederick Pollock inquired whether all the good ones had been killed in the War. As one who owes, in his humble way, an incalculable debt to the craft, I am able to say that many of the most expert are not only still alive, but very wide-awake ; but can there be, within the guild, some

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mysterious inner circle, organized by a representative of the building-trade, and bent on limiting the activity of its initiates in the replacement of bricks dropped by writers ?

Apart from the violation of elementary grammatical rules, I have observed ten phenomena, or groups of phenomena, which blaze with a bright, particular effulgence in contemporary English prose. I dealt with these phenomena in a series of articles which appeared in *T.P.'s Weekly* during the year 1929. These articles are here reproduced with a certain amount of revision, pruning, and elaboration. I find that my collection of atrocities, most of them on the way to become what Mr. H. W. Fowler calls 'Sturdy Indefensibles,' coincides rather curiously

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with the anthology culled by Professor McKnight for his *Modern English in the Making*; but I have not adopted his cruel practice of blazing abroad the names of the offenders.

Among the blunders that disfigure contemporary English none is perhaps more jarring to a sensitive ear than what may be called the 'One of . . . complex.' It is not confined to the semi-illiterate producer of shockers nor to that type of journalist who used to be rudely called a penny-a-liner. Quite recently the front-page article in *The Times Literary Supplement* began with the words: 'Paris, wrote Montaigne, is one of those excellent things which gains in contrast with its rivals.' I do

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not know where Montaigne is supposed to have written this, but, although the language of his day had a grammatical freedom which it lost in the following century, I very much doubt his ever having perpetrated such abominable French as 'une de ces excellentes choses qui gagne . . . ,' *i.e.* using a verb in the singular with its subject in the plural. In the same week a former headmaster of the most famous school in the world discussed in a daily paper 'One of the most delicate and perplexing questions that has ever bewildered an unreflecting public.' One wonders what he would have said to a sixth-form boy who perpetrated the Latin equivalent of this construction.

These are simple examples, of which anyone might be guilty in a careless



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moment, but which should have been corrected in 'revise.' Here are a few more, taken from the *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Observer*, and one of our best contemporary stylists: 'One of the best descriptions that has yet appeared of a modern battle,' 'Mr Viviani was one of those orators who achieved fame by his first speech,' 'Colonel H. is one of the few Englishmen who has crossed the Sahara.' In all these sentences it is quite obvious that the subordinate clause should be in the plural, its subject being a relative pronoun agreeing with a plural antecedent. The writers have been hypnotized by the word *one*, as in this still more hideous example: 'I'm one of the people who poses to himself.' Sometimes serious ambiguity

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may result from this carelessness. When we read that 'Miss Dolly Dimple is one of the famous Blumenfeld Terpsichoreans who has forsaken the stage for the movies,' we are left in doubt as to the numerical reduction that the stage has so catastrophically suffered.

Another variation of the offensiveness to which '*one of . . .*' may lead is the practice of putting the subordinate clause into an incorrect past by association with the tense of the principal clause, *e.g.* 'He habitually appeared one of those careless, casual people who drifted through life waiting for something to turn up,' or 'He was the type of man whose enjoyment was solely in his work.' In the following example the writer has kept on the rails at first, but run off disastrously

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before the finish: 'He was one of those happy people who are content to take people as he found them.' Even more depressing is: 'I am one of those people who are only happy when I am doing somebody else's work.'

The construction is really quite simple to a logical mind. The subordinate clause should always be in the plural, *e.g.* 'He was one of those men who are annoyed at the slightest opposition,' while the tense should be in the present or the past according to sense. In the sentence above it is logically in the present, while in the following it is in the past: 'He was one of those early Christians who deliberately sought martyrdom.' It is perfectly simple and natural to write: 'Irene was one of those damsels who are happiest

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when half-a-dozen swains are silly about them,' while it should be a capital offence to perpetrate such a sentence as 'Irene was one of those damsels who was happiest when half-a-dozen swains are silly about them.'

James Payn, editor of *Chambers's Journal* in the middle of the nineteenth century and later on of the *Cornhill*, being a Victorian, wrote grammatically. In his novel *Found Dead*, a shocker of considerably more artistic construction than the average contemporary product in that genre, he reports a country squire as saying: 'Who did you say I was to show it to?' He appends the, at that time necessary, explanation that 'the squire's grammar was of the

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agricultural sort.' If he had been writing in this age of slipshod English, he would hardly have commented on a construction which seems to have almost acquired civic rights. Mr Epstein, who, like most educated foreigners, uses our language correctly, has recently been interrogated on the question of Jewish artists for Christian Churches. His answer, as published in our most intellectual evening paper, ends with the words : ' Whom can they turn to to-day but the Jew Epstein ? ' The paper in question improves this, in its head-line, into ' To who can they turn to-day but the Jew Epstein ? ' I doubt whether even the squire would have been as agricultural as that. If the author of the following sentence gets his *whos* and *whoms* perfectly right, it

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may be urged that, like the White Knight, he has had 'plenty of practice.' — 'The latter went out now with X., who was twenty years younger than himself, and whom he had not known when at headquarters, but with whom he had become friendly through Y., who received so many visits from her brother, and who herself was now an old friend of the postmaster, of whom Z. approved strongly.'

Let us consider the history of *whom*. Anglo-Saxon suffered from a complicated system of inflexions, most of which have, in the course of centuries, dropped off and perished. It is only in the pronouns that the old distinction between the nominative and the objective survives, and even this is often neglected in colloquial speech. Most

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of us say 'It's me' rather than 'It is I,' and, in so doing, we earn the approbation of a distinguished man of letters.—' "That's him," said Ann Veronica, in sound idiomatic English.' Thackeray wrote playfully :

' No wine may drink the proud paynim,  
And so I'd rather not be him.'

Long before this Shakespeare had been guilty of 'Damn'd be him that first cries, "Hold! enough!"' (*Macbeth*, v, 8). But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the grammarians descended upon us, the process of natural decay was artificially arrested, and the misuse of the objective was left to the uneducated or the excited :

' His eye was so dim,  
So wasted each limb,

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That, heedless of grammar, they all cried  
THAT'S HIM.'

('Ingoldsby,' *The Jackdaw of Rheims*.)

With the objective *whom*, really a blend of the Anglo-Saxon dative and accusative, the process is reversed. Dr Greig, in his amusing *Breaking Priscian's Head* or *English as it will be wrote and spoke*,<sup>1</sup> opines that '*who* has been trying to devour *whom* for centuries . . . and has only been prevented\*from swallowing it up completely by misguided grammarians.' Perhaps he is right as to the inevitable fate of *whom*, though, from the grammatical point of view, one might as well defend 'Why's her a-calling of we? Us don't belong to she.' At any rate it is impossible to skim

<sup>1</sup> 'To-day and To-morrow' series.



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through a best-seller without finding on almost every page such sentences as ' His young wife, who he had just married,' ' I wonder who he wants,' ' Who are you looking for ? ' ' The second man, who I did not recognize.' But there is still a disinclination to write, even in a newspaper headline, ' For who is that ? ' or ' The friend to who he was writing.' The misuse of *who* is now, however, considered venial, if the preposition comes after, as in the squire's question, and the relative is then usually omitted. So the two sentences above become ' Who is that for ? ' and ' The friend he was writing to.' *Whom* is still held in honour in the United States. It is said that in a cultured centre like Boston even the owls say ' to-whit, to whom ' !

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A student of language finds something repulsive in the popular contempt for this ancient objective case, but the converse blunder, the now so frequent misuse of *whom* for *who* by the best-seller who aims at 'correctness,' is almost obscene. It is true that the best-seller can quote as authorities our two greatest repertoires of splendid English. We find in Shakespeare 'Young Ferdinand, whom they suppose is drown'd' (*Tempest*, iii, 3), and in the Bible, 'Whom say ye that I am?' (*St Matthew*, xvi, 15). Both of these incorrect sentences are due to what grammarians call 'attraction,' *i.e.* the pronouns have been loosely associated as objects with the accompanying verbs (*suppose*, *say*) instead of being recognized as the subjects of the verb *to be*.

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Shakespeare and the compilers of the *Authorized Version* were contemporaries. They came before the grammatical age, at a period when Modern English was in the making, and they cannot be considered authoritative for modern usage. Nor do I imagine that the unpleasing misuse of *whom* by contemporary writers is due to intensive study of the Elizabethan drama and Holy Writ. It is rather to be ascribed to 'Ignorance, madame, pure ignorance.' But what about the proof-readers? Surely a decently educated member of the craft should not pass such horrors as 'Mr B., whom they tell me was shot on the Downs last Wednesday,' 'The kind of young man whom one knew instinctively had a good mother and a bad tailor,' 'They

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intend to kill S. whom they are afraid knows too much,' 'I called on a friend of Mrs. B. whom I hoped might give me news of her.' Ignorance is pardonable in authors, especially those who excel in rapidity of output, but the proof-reader should live on a higher plane of culture.

As a token of gratitude from one who likes to devour as many shockers as possible, the following simple device is offered to the best-seller: 'USE COMMAS.' By their help the atrocities just quoted, taken at random from hundreds, will be transmuted into 'Mr B., who, they tell me, was shot on the Downs last Wednesday,' 'The kind of young man, who, one knew instinctively, had a good mother and a bad

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tailor,' ' They intend to kill S., who, they are afraid, knows too much,' ' I called on a friend of Mrs. B., who, I hoped, might give me news of her.' On successive pages of a novel I find : ' Quietly watching the girl, whom he saw was worried about something,' and ' He followed the girl, who, he guessed, was a clerk or typist,' the use of the comma in the second sentence having reminded the author of what he should have learnt at his mother's knee. As for the writer who consistently uses *whom* as the subject of the verb *to be* (' I asked the head-waiter whom he was,' ' Once he passed a man whom he thought was a German spy,' ' I wish you would point out to me the man whom you said was from Scotland Yard '), he (or she) can only be coun-

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selling to ask for the prayers of the congregation.

The English boy or girl is much hampered in the study of languages by the fussiness of foreigners in insisting that articles, adjectives, etc. should agree in gender and number with their nouns, and that verbs should be inflected according to their tense, number, and person. English has reduced the article and adjective to one simple form and has almost done away with inflexions of every kind. We still, however, distinguish between the singular and the plural in the third person of the present tense (*he says, they say*), and a lingering prejudice requires the verb to agree in number with its subject.

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A great poet may, for the sake of his rime, write, 'The tumult and the shouting dies.' He has the authority of Shakespeare—

' Hark ! hark ! the lark at heaven's gate  
sings,  
And Phoebus 'gins arise,  
His steeds to water at those springs  
On chalic'd flowers that lies.'

It might also be urged that 'the tumult and the shouting' can be taken as a single idea. Similarly we may allow the journalist to ask: 'Why is Gilbert and Sullivan so popular?' For these two have long been regarded as forming a delectable compost, with the same right to the singular number as 'Liddell-and-Scott,' or 'bread-and-jam,' or 'whiskey-and-soda.' It is, however, hardly (grammatically) correct to say

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that 'the industry and fecundity of Mr Edgar Wallace continues to amaze.'

Much more common than the incorrect singular verb with the plural subject is its converse. There is a certain type of writer who suffers from what may be called an attraction-complex, *i.e.* his verb is apt to be magnetized off the lines by any plural word that happens to be knocking about in the neighbourhood. He writes: 'One in six Americans own cars.' He knows that *one* is about as singular as a word can be, but the 'six Americans' are too much for him. Sometimes the attraction is exercised by a plural noun following the verb, as in 'This volume of travels are little meditations and impressions of a world tour.' Such a volume 'are' no doubt



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fascinating! Or again: 'The only link of Damascus with the outside world are two narrow-gauge railways.' Here are some fiercer examples, the first penned by a lady of quality and printed without a quiver by our most aristocratic daily, the second from an erudite journalist whose philosophic studies have evidently prevented him from giving much time to elementary grammar—'The wonderful peace of its lawns and meadows are probably quite unique,' 'The cure for all to-day's difficulties are to be found in that great scholar's writings.'

The writer who suffers from this complex should delete everything that intervenes between his subject and his verb, and put his parenthetical enlargements at the end of the sentence.

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Then he will no longer yield to the temptation to write: 'No one, not even the extremists, were prepared for such an outburst,' or 'No one, not even his immediate chiefs at the F.O., were to be told of his whereabouts.' Here it may be remarked that *no one* is contracted into *none*; hence this word is to be regarded as a singular, though usage and common-sense have decided that a plural verb is sometimes simpler and clearer. Still, the Master of Trinity did not say: 'None of us *are* infallible, not even the youngest.'

A delusion somewhat cognate with the preceding is the belief that *with*, *along with*, *as well as*, *like*, etc., are copulative conjunctions equivalent to *and*. Hence we find: 'Lady B., who, with her husband Sir T. B., were on

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board,' ' There was a knock at the door and a woman with a lanky son were shown in,' ' This microscopic blot on Mr D.'s escutcheon, as well as other more commendable details of his life, were duly noted by the zealous Mr E.,' ' The butler, who, besides the cook and the valet, were the only servants he kept.' A sensible order of words would automatically prevent any writer from being guilty of such horrors. It should hardly be necessary to say that *each* and *every* are singulars and that the sporting journalist should not write: ' Three young players, each of whom have earned considerable distinction this season.'

It is as well to remember what is the subject of a sentence before writing down pronouns correlative to it. The

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following is rather ugly : ' One passes through the great hall of the castle to reach the court, and your passage is lined by two rows of policemen.' It is true that this change of person is one of the few obscurities allowed in French, but why not begin with *You* ? Quite indefensible is a sudden change of gender in dealing with a personified neuter, *e.g.* ' The British Empire owes its success to the justice and moderation of her true statesmen,' or ' Japan, with its teeming, crowded population, eagerly watches her chance to fish in troubled ~~wa~~ waters.' It is almost painful to find an uncompromising total abstainer expressing himself as follows : ' I desire to state that the party I represent are quite clear and definite in our case for Prohibition.' The

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sentiment may be irreproachable, but  
'clear and definite'?

Is *crowd* a singular or a plural? Should we say 'The crowd was dispersing' or 'The crowd were dispersing?' Either is correct, though we should hardly say 'A crowd of children was playing in the meadow,' nor ever 'The rest of the children is quite well.' This is a point in which English has much more freedom than other languages. In Latin a collective subject is occasionally found with a plural verb, the stock example of this construction being *turba ruunt*, the crowd rush on. In Old-French the same liberty was allowed, but Modern-French, with its love for logical exactness,

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regards a collective as a grammatical singular and invariably renders our initial example by 'La foule se dispersait.' But, when the collective is accompanied by a plural complement, the verb is put in the singular or plural according as the writer visualizes a compact unit or a scattering of individuals. Most Frenchmen would use the singular in reference to 'A company of grenadiers' but the plural in reference to 'A mob of fugitives.' It is largely a matter of taste.

To return to English.—Our prevailing practice is to treat a collective as a plural and to say 'The committee have decided . . . , ' 'The public are dissatisfied . . . , ' 'The cabinet are divided . . . , ' etc., though there is no hard-and-fast rule, and it is equally

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correct to say 'The committee has decided. . . .' There are some nouns of this type which we hardly ever treat as singular, *e.g.* *police*, as in 'The police are baffled, have a clue, profess themselves satisfied, etc.'

Conversely we occasionally make a plural into a kind of collective singular, as in 'a golf-links,' 'The Winter Gardens is a municipal institution,' or 'The United States has called into existence a new steel-works,' a pretty hideous specimen.

By analogy with true collectives other words which contain something of the same idea are used with a plural verb, *e.g.* 'The management are anxious,' but this may lead to such an atrocity as 'This type are often troublesome.' I remember, as a small boy,

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asking my father whether it was correct to say ' This kind of people ' or ' These kind of people,' and receiving the rather sardonic advice to substitute ' People of this description.'

Cricket counties and football teams seem to be regularly regarded as plurals, *e.g.* ' Kent are playing Sussex next week,' ' Newcastle United are very strong this season,' and names of firms are often treated in the same way, especially those of publishers, though it is rather disconcerting to find in the ' literary column,' as consecutive items, ' John Murray have in preparation . . . ,' and ' Geoffrey Bles is publishing shortly. . . . '

As may be gathered from the preceding remarks, a good deal of liberty is allowed us in dealing with collectives.



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As a result of this liberty we are confronted in almost every book or newspaper with an anarchical mixture of constructions. The sporting journalist is the great sinner, with his 'The Exeter crew has called in Mr Steve Fairbairn to coach them,' 'The Irish pack has undergone changes since they met France.' But the sporting journalist is in distinguished company. An ex-Cabinet-Minister writes: 'The government is buying up skilled workers for emergency purposes; they are specializing in local government employees.' A well-known publisher calls our attention to a book to which 'The French Academy has just awarded their medal.' A leader-writer in a great daily observes that 'The Admiralty has at length taken a step which

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has been urged upon them since the Armistice.' Another daily informs us that 'the L.M.S. is electrifying several sections of their system,' and yet a third that 'the public has subscribed money and they want to see something for it.'

The great Henry Bradley, when 'viva-ing' an attractive young lady at Oxford, pointed out to her rather sternly that, in one of her papers, she had assigned Hampole to the second, instead of to the first, half of the fourteenth century; to which she replied brightly: 'Did I really? Well, it doesn't much matter, does it?' Similarly it may be said that the monstrosities here quoted convey a clear meaning to average intelligence, and that their incorrectness 'doesn't much

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matter.' It all depends on the point of view. Some people are not moved by the sight of cruelty.

Here are a few more examples—  
'The management was kind enough to allow their patrons occasional intervals,' 'The bulk of humanity bears a marked resemblance to the cheap little suburban streets in which they live,' 'That type of criminal never fights when they're cornered.' In the following specimen the author realizes that an abstract noun like *Bolshevism* cannot be other than singular, but he is unequal to a sustained flight,—  
'Bolshevism objects to fixed standards, because it knows that its inferiority will thereby be rendered manifest; therefore it seeks either to enter upon side-tracks where com-

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petition is evaded, or to throw scorn upon the great geniuses of the Past, whom they hate to acknowledge as their superiors.'

Voltaire once wrote of 'le superflu, chose très nécessaire,' a famous definition, which runs counter to the general tendency of proverbial lore. However agreeable superfluity may be in the matter of an income, it is always objectionable in language, in which it is usually called by the Greek name *pleonasm*, 'too-muchness.' It is now recognized that double comparatives and double negatives are superfluous, though Shakespeare uses both freely. One's reading of American novels suggests that such a sentence as 'I

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ain't seen none ' does not offend in the mouth of a cousin from the Middle West, but it is surprising to find a distinguished English physician announcing that ' human cancer cannot be communicated to an animal, neither by implanting it in the skin, nor by feeding.'

There are pleonasms which are permissible, because centuries of tradition have made them enter into the very pith of the language. Some are expressions of Biblical origin, in which the English translates literally the rhetorical original. The sentence ' He that hath ears to hear, let him hear ' certainly contains two superfluous words, but it would be a bold man who suggested their deletion. The most important group of permissible pleonasms may be

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exemplified by such phrases as 'in any shape or form,' 'my own act and deed,' 'law and order,' 'ways and means,' etc. These phrases have a curious origin. After the Conquest, the language of the law was for centuries a barbarous form of French. As this was unintelligible to the conquered English, the practice gradually prevailed of coupling two words, one French and the other native, with the result that such pairs may now be counted by dozens.

Apart from such pleonasms as are sanctified by long usage, and even these should be used sparingly, a pleonastic statement is as objectionable as one that is left incomplete. Few words are more often misused than *both*. 'Both men exchanged a glance' and

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' They both knew each other by sight ' are obviously absurd. ' The room which she and her sister shared together ' makes us reflect on the difficulty of sharing a room separately. So also ' They both belonged to different species ' (instead of only one differing from the other !). Here it may be noted, though not to our immediate purpose, that *both* can refer only to two things or facts. The sentence ' I have modelled both my thoughts, my speech and my style very carefully on those of the master ' suggests that some other literary model might profitably have been selected. *Else* and *other*, when negatived, are also apt to lead to trouble, as in the two following sentences, in which pleonasm is not the only sign of illiteracy—' Except this

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room none of the others were furnished,'  
' There is nobody else with the exception  
of we two.'

The clumsy writer cannot leave well alone. He is not satisfied with saying that the subject of his obituary-notice 'retired on a well earned pension.' It has to be 'a well earned, highly merited pension.' One novelist makes a character say: 'You have entered upon a vendetta of revenge,' as though a vendetta might conceivably be associated with philanthropic activities; and a most eminent pleader refers eloquently to 'poisoned venom.' A critic informs us that 'Mr E. is an incomparable phrase-maker, like Tennyson,' thus proceeding to 'compare' one whom he has just declared to be 'incomparable.' Sometimes



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pleonasm results from a mixture of two constructions, as in 'equally as good,' common in what is sometimes called 'shop English.' This is due to confusion between the simple 'quite as good' and the more pretentious 'equally good.'

'When in doubt, strike it out' is invaluable advice to the literary aspirant. Unfortunately the careless or incompetent writer never is in doubt. Presumably he does not trouble to revise what he has written; otherwise we should scarcely find 'The chief cause of colds is due to the stuffy indoor life we lead,' 'The story begins, like those of G. P. R. James's, with two horsemen,' 'The coming season will be far from being a good one,' 'It is hardly thirty years ago since the first motor-

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cars were seen on the roads,' ' Out of 227 cases of cancer treated with lead, at least 50 of them have benefited distinctly,' ' I am uncertain as to whether he intends to come.'

There is one odd sort of pleonasm which is especially popular with the 'best-seller.' It consists in the addition to a subordinate clause of a redundant negative which really contradicts what the writer means to say, as in the sentence 'I wouldn't be surprised if she wasn't a spy.' Sometimes the effect is rather ludicrous, *e.g.* the sentence 'He said he shouldn't be surprised if Sir John hadn't murdered his wife,' seems to indicate a real desire to think charitably of all men. This blunder is especially common after an introductory *but*, as in 'She never meets me but she

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doesn't talk about you,' or ' He never saw this girl but his tongue did not cleave to the roof of his mouth.' The subject of the second sentence may be congratulated on having escaped a rather distressing physical experience. The chronicler of Society small beer who writes : ' I was very sorry to hear of the death of Sir X. Y. ; I do not know how many times we have not been through this column together ' is somewhat hazy, but, on the whole, probably nearer the truth than he meant to be.

The young Spartans, we are told, were trained in habits of sobriety by being taken periodically to see the revels of the drunken helots. This

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may be called negative teaching. Similarly, anyone who ventures to offer a few modest suggestions to the 'prentice writer of English finds it easier to say 'Don't' than 'Do,' and is inclined to make more use of the awful example than of the flawless model.

Our language is essentially one of short words. If there had been no Norman Conquest and no Renaissance of Learning, English might now be almost as monosyllabic as Chinese. Even in modern English many of the most stately musical effects are produced by the simplest and shortest words. Coleridge was better acquainted than most of us with polysyllables, but he had no need of them when he wrote :

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'The sun's rim dips ; the stars rush  
out :

At one stride comes the dark.'

These lines produce a perfect effect by their very simplicity and restraint, whereas a lady novelist's definition of amorous rapture as 'the hallelujah of the pink, the purring flesh,' though equally unforgettable, just misses sobriety.

There is a very general tendency now to employ twenty words where five would be ample and to indulge, whenever possible, in those which are distinguished by learned length and thundering sound, such as *mentality*, *orientation*, *meticulous*, and *proposition*. Mr Fowler quotes a 'vigorous condemnation' of a Prime Minister 'whose temperamental inaptitude for diplomacy

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and preoccupation with domestic issues have rendered his participation in external negotiations gravely detrimental to the public welfare.' 'Vigorous indeed,' says Mr Fowler; 'a charging hippopotamus hardly more so.' The writer of such a passage no doubt 'ignites' his cigarettes, 'envisages' possibilities, and is fonder of 'adumbrating' than of 'hinting.' This craze is often accompanied by an itch for foreign words, especially to be noticed in the utterances of the excited politician, the kind of orator whom *Punch* shows us announcing that 'if the bourgeoisie remains intransigent, the proletariat must resort to sabotage.'

The misuse of foreign words by the ignorant and pretentious is a subject

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that would fill a volume. I will be satisfied with one example—‘ Mr A. F. Hardiman, whose recently chosen design for the Haig Memorial caused such a furore.’ If that design really excited ‘ enthusiastic popular admiration ’ (so the Oxford Dictionary defines *furore*), I must have misread my daily paper.

A passion for long words does not imply moral delinquency ; in fact it is one of the most amusing characteristics of the age of innocence ; but the adult who allows himself this indulgence should at least have some idea of the meaning of the polysyllables he flaunts so proudly. A very successful novelist seems to have a rooted conviction that *æsthetic* connotes a hungry, grim and haggard aspect, in fact that *æsthetic* is *ascetic*. So he writes : ‘ He was tall,

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spare, almost æsthetic,' or again, 'As straight as a die, his emaciated and æsthetic face was relieved by two burning eyes.' A face with such an unusual combination of characteristics, not to mention its being as straight as a die, certainly clamours for some sort of relief. No decent person would wish to scoff at mistakes due to early educational disadvantages, *e.g.* to deride the Labour member who uses *protagonist* under the impression that it means the opposite of *antagonist*; but a novelist whose sales must be enriching him beyond the dreams of avarice might reasonably be asked to employ an educated secretary or proof-reader; better still, a dozen!

Another novelist uses the word *cavalcade* to describe two people pushing



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a street-organ, and is so pleased with the word that he repeats it half-a-dozen times. A third tells us that his hero's extraordinary story 'evidently taxed the C.I.D. man's credibility,' and describes the 'foreboding features' of the villain. A provincial journalist, referring to the illness of a local magnate, informs the world that 'the patient's progress has been watched by his fellow-townsmen with the most affectionate solicitation.' In a recent shocker we read of 'the railed cattle pen which was euphoniously called the prisoners' dock.' Is there really anything musical about the words 'prisoners' dock'? Are they even euphemistic, if that is what is meant? A heroine, we are told, 'was small, but so perfectly shaped that he would

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not have added a single cubit to her stature.' One is inclined to think that she might have resented a sudden elongation by about 20 inches.

Sometimes a pretentious use of unfamiliar words approaches imbecility. Being privileged to know Miss S., who is now Mrs M., I was interested to read that she 'exploited her back-hand drive with great aplomb,' though I hardly understand how she did it. With the sporting journalist who tells us that 'the enjoyment of the spectators was considerably lessened by the paucity of the Lancashire fielding,' we may compare the political leader from whom we learn that 'Five or six gentlemen left the League and tried to form a Triumvirate.' A writer whose heroine is 'wracked with anxiety'

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should ask to see the 'wrack' at the Tower of London. Another, who describes an audience as 'listening with wrapt attention,' might find a better way of describing their 'wroughture.'

An accidental resemblance sometimes leads to disaster. *Deprecate* only differs from *depreciate* by a letter, but the words have quite separate origins and meanings. The writer who cannot distinguish them should leave them alone rather than write 'Self-deprecation is often merely a form of vanity,' or, 'He waived (he means 'waved') aside the compliment with a depreciating gesture.' The sentence 'The result surpassed my most sanguinary hopes' was evidently penned by an author of fine sensibility.

At the present day no word is so

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often misused as *literally*. I remember being told by a very charming lady that many of the hills she had motored up and down in Cornwall were 'literally perpendicular.' The late Mr John Dillon once stated that the eyes of Irishmen all over the world were 'literally fixed on Dublin,' and 'literally petrified' is now quite a usual synonym for 'much astonished.' In a recent novel a heroine, who is more than once reduced to this Lot's wife kind of condition, is further described as 'superficial to the core.' In announcing exceptionally heavy military losses, it is usual to speak of a force as 'literally decimated.' Any unit that came out of a big battle in this condition would be lucky, for losing one man in ten is not considered very disastrous in

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modern warfare. The misuse dates from the nineteenth century only, but it is now quite established and accepted.

One of the latest disfigurements of our language is the use of 'due to' as though it had become, like 'owing to,' a semi-preposition. A musical knight tells us that 'mediocrity is dead to-day, due largely to what mechanical music has done for us.' The first example I ever came across—'The American girl, due chiefly to the hot climate, regards learning to swim as being nearly as important as securing a husband,'—puzzled me considerably, until I realized that the author did not wish to describe the American girl as chiefly, or even secondarily, due to the hot climate.

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Samuel Butler, the *Erewhon* Samuel, not the *Hudibras*, decided at the age of twenty-three that 'A man should be clear of his meaning before he endeavours to give it any kind of utterance ; having made up his mind what to say, the less thought he takes how to say it, more than briefly, pointedly and plainly, the better.' No doubt, when Butler arrived at riper years, he added a second rule to the effect that a man should carefully reconsider the finished product and decide how far brevity, point, and plainness have been attained.

The key to an effective style, *i.e.* a style which effects its proper purpose of explaining, informing, interesting or merely entertaining, is simplicity. Most of the bad writing that prevails

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to-day is due to the attempt to write 'well.' Long and clumsy sentences, in which the writer loses himself with disastrous results to his grammar, long and unnecessary words (often used in a quite wrong sense) spoil the critical reader's enjoyment of many books which really have good stuff in them.

Ambiguity, indispensable though it is in the oracular and political worlds, is irritating in print. It is perhaps not to be regarded too seriously in English, for our language is distinguished by a kind of rough-and-ready practicality which enables both writer and reader to 'muddle through' without serious disaster. That is why the inarticulate, as also the super-articulate, are so fond of concluding their remarks with : ' You

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know what I mean.' But there is a certain impertinence in putting before the public constructions and sentences which have to be read twice before their meaning, or lack of meaning, can be detected. Nothing irritates a reader more, even if only subconsciously.

A fertile source of ludicrous ambiguity is the misuse of the hyphen. This does not usually lead to misunderstanding, though it provokes many a chuckle. The advertiser who announces a 'superfluous hair-remover' does not really mean that his nostrum is unnecessary, nor do we understand it so ; but, when we see a newspaper column headed 'Search for woman strangler,' we may be pardoned for supposing a lady thug to be at large, whereas it turns out that a male murderer, who specializes



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as a ' woman-strangler,' is being hunted in California.

As already hinted, every young writer should have a course of instruction in the use of the harmless, necessary comma. It is evident that ' the writer who knows something about India ' has not the same meaning as ' the writer, who knows something about India,' though this distinction is often ignored in our morning paper. The omission of a comma in ' It was uncertain whether he was actually executed because a page of the chronicle was missing ' inclines us to muse on the sad fate which, under an earlier penal code, might befall those who did not take care of documents. The comma, by breaking up a paragraph in such a way as to help the eye and brain,

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facilitates quick comprehension. It is possible to write quite a long paragraph in which no comma is imperatively necessary, but it is better to reconstruct it than to present the reader with 'The real explanation of why the American system of government as we see it to-day is far behind the British system in efficiency and an astonishing contrast to American efficiency in general is that the Americans reached the present peak of material civilization too quickly with the result that instead of continuing to shape and mould their laws and constitutions nearer to their hearts' desires they abandoned themselves to more attractive pursuits leaving it to the professional politicians to do the moulding.'

The chief factor in creating what

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may be called silly ambiguity is a clumsy order of words. In our early schoolboy days we came to the conclusion that the order of words in Latin did not matter. Later on we became wiser. In French the order of words is always carefully controlled. In English the order, or disorder, of words often produces the most ludicrous effect. It is at this slovenliness that our greatest living humorist is poking fun, when he writes: 'We walked round for a while, looking at the animals, and suddenly he asked me to marry him outside the cage of the Siberian yak.'

Here are a few examples recently noted—'The small boy concealed a cigarette he was smoking behind his back.' Evidently a contortionist

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smoker. 'You went in for horse-racing, thinking you would succeed as everybody does who backs horses.' This pronouncement of an English judge has the optimism which we naturally associate with judicial innocence. 'The miscreant openly mocked at the doctors who mistook the effects of the poison he had administered for gastritis.' Only a 'miscreant' would treat gastritis in this callous way. 'They put a gipsy or fortune-teller into prison for getting money out of silly people who think they have supernatural powers.' Why should such gifted silly people bother a fortune-teller at all? 'People drinking coffee and wine in deep tapestry chairs.' Contortionists again, but bad for the chairs. 'On leaving the university,

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a rich aunt had died and left him 25,000 dollars.' Perhaps she died of grief at leaving. None of the above sentences leads to serious misunderstanding, any more than the famous advice to a mother: 'If the baby does not thrive on cow's milk, boil it'; but they are of an unpleasing clumsiness and remind one of the outburst of the Nonconformist divine, who, after expressing his contempt for the trappings of the Anglican clergyman, announced proudly: 'I wear no clothes to distinguish me from other Christians.'

The French have a very wise practice of keeping the relative pronoun in the closest possible contact with its antecedent. It is a pity we do not observe the same rule. When we read that a lady 'had a dull gold chain round her

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neck, which hung down as low as her waist,' we visualize for the moment a startling deformity. The statement that 'A great stretch of waste land reached to the Embankment, which was covered with willow-herb every summer' makes us wonder how this vegetation resisted the traffic. The *Times Literary Supplement* tells us that 'it was on condition that she should write a preface or apology for the stories, which, as a matter of fact, she never wrote.' Well, if she never wrote the stories, why should she be expected to apologize for them? 'We went for supper to the Automobile Club, which I wanted badly' reminds one of the old lady who 'wanted' the Bank of England. The sentence: 'He did not know any girl whom he would not rather

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die than marry ' has a fine unambiguous ring, but how do you ' die ' a girl ? This hero, by the way, is described as wearing ' thick hair, cut rather long.'

Soon after the fall of our first Labour government we read that ' Mr Wheatley, who was a member of the Labour cabinet, shook the dust of the Front Opposition bench off his feet last week.' Is this an insinuation against the charwomen of the House of Commons or does it suggest that Mr Wheatley is so advanced as to put his feet up in the House ? We cannot accept either innuendo. If, by an exceptional oversight, any dust is ever left on the bench, it is not to the feet of the minister that we should expect it to adhere. In this contrasted picture of the two villains in a shocker, the one ' huge,

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bulky, and dominating, immaculately clad in London-built clothes,' the other 'undersized and badly dressed, wearing a cravat and peaked cap,' the adverb 'badly' might be advantageously replaced by 'inadequately.'

If the first duty of the writer is to make himself clear, the second is to avoid unpleasing clumsiness. There is, however, one group of words involving grammatical gymnastics which so far few have succeeded in performing with grace and confidence. Unfortunately the words in question are indispensable and cannot be dodged. They are the indefinite *somebody*, *someone*, *anybody*, *nobody*, *everybody*, and such sexually indeterminate nouns as *person*, *student*,



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*individual.* The problem is to decide whether pronouns used in relation to these words are to be masculine or feminine.

For the old grammarians there was no difficulty. They held, rightly or wrongly, that the masculine was 'worthier' than the feminine, and would have said without hesitation: 'If anyone asks for me, tell him to wait.' But, with the advance of feminism, this over-shadowing of the female by the male is no longer tolerated, and the political theorist finds himself writing in such a style as: 'The time has come when every citizen should be compelled by law to cast his or her vote at all elections, or they should be disfranchised.' He is trying to be conscientiously grammatical, but he

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breaks down at the finish and uses the plural *they* in reference to the singular *every*.

There is really not much else to be done, as the novelist found, who wrote : ' No one ever does speak correctly now-a-days ; does he—does she—do they, I mean ? ' Still, it might be possible to avoid the following philosophic dictum of a well-known best-seller— ' Everyone who believes what they say is eloquent.' If only we had a personal pronoun of common gender with a corresponding possessive ! Then we should not be reduced to ' No one troubled their heads about him,' or ' If anyone calls, tell them to wait,' nor should we need to extend our respectful sympathy to such a pathetic attempt as ' Everybody who came to his

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house was free to do so as he or she liked, as long as their conduct excited no unfavourable comment,' where the writer, finding himself confronted by 'his or her conduct,' has recoiled aghast. Braver, but still flinching before a final effort, is the author of 'Which of us is not convinced in his or her heart that he or she could write, if only they had the time and the leisure?'

The number of nouns that have to be treated in this diplomatic fashion grows steadily, partly as a result of the female invasion of what used to be considered male occupations. How useful our new pronoun would be in saving us from such ugliness as: 'Why had this mysterious person tried to get into the house again, and for whom or what were they searching?' Obviously the

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preceding sentence is from a shocker, and in such literature the shocks administered to grammarians are innumerable; but I find one of our most charming critics and essayists perpetrating: 'No great writer, from Homer down to Charles Dickens, ever made unredeemed brutes their principal characters.' This concession to feminism seems exaggerated. Better to have reverted to the practice of the eighteenth century and to have boldly written *his*!

Somewhat of the same character is the *either . . . or* and *neither . . . nor* difficulty. Should the verbs, or other words, relating to the alternative subjects thus introduced be in the singular or the plural? Here again the question only arises in connection

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with the present tense and with our solitary 'irregular' past (*was, were*). When we say : ' Either he or I will see about it,' it does not matter whether the idea behind the words is ' he will,' ' I will,' or ' we will ' ; but, in the present tense, we have to tackle the disconcerting -s, which really, from the language point of view, is a survival as unnecessary and troublesome as our tonsils. A possible alternative to the new pronoun we need would be the abolition of this isolated inflexion, long since abandoned by the Norfolk peasant.

Even grammarians allow a good deal of latitude in this construction, and, though *either . . or, neither . . nor* usually select one of two alternatives, they are often followed by a plural construction. Bishop Thirlwall writes

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of 'religious rites by which either Thebes or Eleusis were afterwards distinguished,' a sentence which the Oxford Dictionary stigmatizes as 'incorrect.' Mr Fowler, in his indispensable *Modern English Usage*, is equally uncompromising, and tells us that, in Ruskin's 'Neither painting nor fighting feed men,' a singular verb (*feeds*, not *feed*) is undoubtedly required. Here I find myself, for once, disagreeing with Mr Fowler. No language is as logical as French, and French grammarians decided long ago that, in such constructions, the singular is only *de rigueur* when the two terms are mutually exclusive. The stock example in French grammars used to be something like 'Ni l'or ni la grandeur ne nous rendent heureux.' But I cordially agree with

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Mr Fowler as to the iniquity of using *either* and *neither*, unaccompanied by *or* and *nor*, as plurals, *e.g.* 'If either of these methods are successful' and 'Lord H. and Lord R. were born the one in Paris and the other at The Hague, neither being British subjects at the time of his birth.' To the second example Mr Fowler adds the caustic comment that 'neither could be, unless he were twins.'

When the two linked subjects are of different persons, trouble is inevitable, and even the purist is inclined to take refuge in a plural, as in 'Either that man or I go out of the room foremost.' The writer who clings conscientiously to the singular may produce something like 'Lord Morley once remarked to me: "Neither you nor I

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am entirely ourselves,"' which impels *Punch* to inquire: 'Then, who else am we?'

' " But suppose there are two mobs ?" suggested Mr Snodgrass. " Shout with the largest," replied Mr Pickwick.' As political advice nothing could be sounder than this dictum of a philosopher, as a grammatical construction it is, strictly speaking, faulty. Logically and correctly the comparative, and not the superlative, should be used in a ' comparison ' between two. Sometimes we are conscious of this fact. It would give most of us a shock to hear read out in church: ' A certain man had two sons: and the *youngest* of them said to his father . . . ' ; but the



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classical rule is so little regarded now that its violation has become one of those peccadillos which call for no punishment, like 'pinching' a car, if you call yourself a joy-rider, or raiding orchards, if you belong to a powerful political organization. In one of the best-written of recent shockers we read :  
' "Take a chair, inspector," said the lawyer, pointing to the least worn of the two.' It jars a little, but not painfully.

Another venial offence, which has already been mentioned in connection with *whom*, is the use of the objective case of personal pronouns in place of the nominative. Taking examples from the same shocker, we find : ' Yes, that'll be him ; I remember the name now,' said by a belted knight, and

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‘ Why should you know and not me ? ’  
said by a belted knight’s daughter.  
This liberty, or licence, is of very  
ancient date. It is common with the  
Elizabethans, though not in the Bible,  
and Matthew Prior, who died in 1721,  
was guilty of :

‘ For thou art a girl as much brighter  
than her  
As he was a poet sublimer than me.’

The eighteenth-century grammarians  
frowned on this freedom, and those of  
us who date back to the mid-Victorian  
age were sternly instructed on the sub-  
ject. Personally I say ‘ That’s me,’  
hesitate at ‘ That’s him (*or* her),’ and  
draw the line at ‘ Between you and I,  
him and her drink too much.’

The first part of the last sentence,

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for 'between you and me,' is no doubt the germ responsible for a now very prevalent vulgarism, viz. the use of the nominative for the objective. Some people are so obsessed by the 'incorrectness' of 'It's me,' 'Us girls,' etc., so determined to be genteel, that they use the nominative, especially *I* and *we*, in the most extraordinary fashion. Here are a few examples—'Of course it was out of the question for mother and I to go.' If no mother were concerned, the writer would hardly have said: 'It was out of the question for I to go.' He is haunted by the 'you and I' bogey of politeness. Now we turn to a professor, who, rightly disapproving of confrères who speak of themselves as 'us geologists,' is guilty of 'Few people, apart from we dull old

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geologists . . .' Reverting to the novelist, we are confronted with : ' I shall leave you and she to decide the matter between you.' It is usually the coupling of two pronouns that leads to the trouble, though a distinguished literary man had not this excuse when he startled his admirers with :

' Bloom of delicate laughter  
Winds round each tragic rafter  
We artists to delight.'

Psychologically akin to this delusion is the current confusion between *lie* and *lay*. It may seem superfluous to say that *lie, lay, lain* is an intransitive verb of position, and *lay, laid, laid* a transitive verb of action ; but apparently some of our most successful literary artists need help in the matter. It

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may be admitted at once that *lie* is practically unused in rustic speech. The weary agricultural labourer who 'lays down' has the authority of Byron — 'And dasheth him again to earth. There let him lay' (*Childe Harold*, iv, 180). But the distinction between the two verbs is now so clearly established in educated speech, that it comes as a shock to read in one's morning paper : 'The prince dismounted and laid on the grass for a few minutes.' A teacher who is concerned with communicating to French students the elements of correct English, and who tells them to beware of such a vulgarism as the above, is somewhat disconcerted when confronted with the following from a man of letters of world-wide reputation : 'She found a place for him on the

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sword and S. laid down beside her.' His name? Nay, I am no scandal-monger.

This is all very sad, but not nearly so distressing as the antics of those writers who, determined not to use a vulgar *laid*, are guilty of 'Had you lain hands on it, nothing could have saved you,' or 'He lay the book flat on his chest, as the click of the door announced the entrance of his retainer.' These two examples are from the works of shocker-manufacturers, but, when we find in a great daily: 'The terrible Tai-ping rebellion had lain waste half the country', and 'Nearly every possible crime has been lain at the door of the accused,' we really feel inclined to suggest sacking the office-boy—or, at any rate, transferring the final

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revision of proofs from him to the charlady.

Most of us, however ignorant we may be of grammatical science, have our little fads. About the year 1860 some wiseacre decreed that *reliable* must be ostracized, and many writers still make a rule of substituting *trust-worthy*. The critic argued that *reliable* was an American neologism and that the ending *-able* could only properly be applied to transitive verbs, *e.g.* that as *eatable* means what can be eaten, *reliable* would have to be interpreted as what can be relied, which, as Euclid says, is absurd. One scoffer ironically suggested, as an improvement, *un-rely-upon-able*. He perhaps had in mind

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the early parallel *uncomeatable*, found in the seventeenth century, but stigmatized by Johnson as 'a low, corrupt word.'

If the formation of new words were always strictly conditioned by logic, language would soon begin to show signs of senile decrepitude. Although the objection to *reliable* may be logically justified, it shows profound ignorance of language-history ; for the word was already current in the sixteenth century, *i.e.* more than two hundred years before ' Americanisms ' were ever heard of, and has the authority of some of our greatest writers. The same objection might be urged against *available*, *indispensable*, *dependable*, *laughable*. The last of these, which, by the same argument, should be replaced by *laugh-at-*



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*able*, was good enough for Shakespeare, who very possibly coined the adjective :

‘ And other of such vinegar aspect  
That they’ll not show their teeth by  
way of smile,  
Though Nestor swear the jest be  
laughable.’  
(*Merchant of Venice*, i, i.)

A second superstition is that no sentence should end with a preposition. Everybody has heard of the school-inspector who solemnly announced to a class of small children : ‘ A preposition is a very bad word to end a sentence with.’ This mania dates from the seventeenth century and is due to the strong Latin influence which dominated writers of that age. ‘ Preposition at end ’ is impossible in Latin, therefore

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not allowable in English. Such was the attitude of Dryden, who became so infected with this particular microbe that, late in life, he went carefully through his Prefaces and re-adjusted all the peccant prepositions. Gibbon was also a sufferer.

The construction is really one of those practical concessions which help to make English the most expressive and flexible language in Europe. One can have too much of it. I do not much like this, from Butler's *Way of All Flesh* : ' The kind of man whom Ernest was sure to be afraid of and yet be taken in by,' and liberty degenerates into licence, when the little girl, dissatisfied with the literary entertainment provided, asks peevishly : ' Why did you bring that book for me to be

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read to out of from for ? ' But, if we are to abolish ' What are you looking for ? ', ' The people I was dining with, ' The business they are engaged in, ' Nothing to write home about, ' etc., we shall have to talk a much stiffer language than the one we are accustomed to ! Shakespeare's ' naughty night to swim in ' will have to be textually emended, and the chambermaid, giving evidence in a *cause célèbre*, reluctant to say that ' the bed had not been slept in, ' will announce with dignity that ' the bed revealed no impress of a human form. '

Thirdly and lastly, the split infinitive, the *bête noire* (or, as our best writers prefer to call it, *bête noir*) of so many misguided people. The Oxford Dictionary has no record of the term ' split

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infinitive' before 1897, though, a few years earlier, some purist had contributed an article on the 'cleft infinitive' to the *American Journal of Philology*. Dean Alford, whose 'Queen's English,' published in 1863, can still be profitably consulted, discusses 'the insertion of an adverb between the sign of the infinitive mood and the verb' and dismisses the whole question with the summary judgment: 'Surely this is a practice entirely unknown to English speakers and writers.'

The Dean is mistaken. The split infinitive does not occur in Shakespeare, nor in the *Authorized Version* of the Bible, and is, in fact, almost unknown before the nineteenth century, but it has great literary authority and is quite

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permissible, if ambiguity is avoided by its use. The great authority is Byron, who uses it so frequently that he has been called the 'Father of the Split Infinitive.' I do not know that he was ever criticized by his contemporaries for this iniquity. It was left to a later generation to find fault with such a line as 'To slowly trace the forest's shady sheen.' A modern culprit was Thomas Hardy. The clever craftsman whose name occurs at the beginning of this little book comments as follows—'The fact that Hardy often uses "split infinitives" destroys to my mind the force of the common rigid condemnation of "split infinitives" as "bad English." I avoid them myself, but I cannot feel that Hardy was a blunderer.'

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As for ambiguity, surely it is wiser, even at the cost of 'splitting' the infinitive, to risk: 'This system has been devised in order to better equip boys for the struggle of life,' than to imitate the Pharisaical 'non-splitter' who carefully writes: 'This system has been devised to equip better boys for the struggle of life.' Of course both the 'split' and the absurdity could be avoided by changing the order of the words, and this is perhaps the best course. It conciliates those whom Mr Fowler describes as the 'Non-Split Die-hards' (one of whom wrote that words failed 'to adequately express' his abhorrence of the error), and avoids a construction which is, at any rate, doubtful English. Mr Fowler himself, discussing the pronunciation of *truffle*,

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does not hesitate to write, for the sake of clearness : ‘ Association with French cookery leads many people to partly assimilate the sound . . . ’ ; but I would not advise anyone to imitate the American lexicographer who states in his Introduction that ‘ Necessarily brief, the etymologies will notwithstanding be found to adequately meet the needs of most inquirers,’ and who, in a booklet on faulty English, writes of ‘ the failure to correctly interpret the meaning of words.’

The ‘ split infinitive ’ inhibition (if that is the right word) often leads to grotesque word-order, when the sufferer does not know what an infinitive is. The construction is understood to be severely barred by most of our great dailies. Unfortunately the editor does

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not always explain to his staff that, while 'to carefully refrain' is a split infinitive, 'to be seriously annoyed' is not. The consequence is that the harassed journalist, as he writes: 'The state contribution is very largely to be increased,' murmurs to himself: 'Thank God, I haven't split that one!' He thus acquires the habit of jamming the adverb in front of the word *to*, feeling, I suppose, that it had better be got out of the way before it can do any harm. So we get such unnatural 'English' as 'Sir Austin was unable offhand to reply,' 'Tree had too much sense of humour ever successfully to play a romantic character,' 'Her tone caused the lady slightly to flush.' If you cannot make your meaning clear without a split infinitive, my advice



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would be that of the Duke of Wellington to the blackmailer with the compromising letters, substituting, of course, 'split' for 'publish.'

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